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Commentary on Juhani Rudanko's "Reinstating and Defining Ad Socordiam as an Informal Fallacy: A case study from a political debate in the early American republic"

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Rudanko draws our attention to a fallacy which is not well known in argumentation theory: the *ad socordiam* fallacy. This is a fallacy which describes a discussion move used to postpone a matter in the hope that it will be forgotten and never taken up again. There is a saying: "One of these days is none of these days"; this appears to hold particularly well for an *ad socordiam* fallacy, as its proponent is indeed talking about a future event on "one of these days" in the hope that it happens on "none of these days."

In order to create some familiarity with the *ad socordiam* fallacy, Rudanko presents us with a case study taken from the historical debate about the Federal Bill of Rights which took place in the U.S. House of Representatives in the summer of 1789. At some point during the debate, the issue about whether amendments to the Constitution should be discussed was raised. Anti-Federalists were keen to, but Federalists were determined to prevent the discussion from taking place. To this end, one of the Federalist representatives, Mr. James Jackson of Georgia, proposed that the discussion should be postponed for ten months. He argued that the best scenario would be to first try the Constitution out, experience it first hand, and then discuss any amendments later.

In my view, searching for fallacies that have not (yet) been discerned in fallacy theory is a useful activity—especially if one is searching for fallacies that are connected to as specific a context as the political one. However, I have some doubts about whether the discussion move *ad socordiam* should be qualified as a fallacy at all. According to Rudanko, a fallacy is defined by two characteristics. The first is that a proponent of the discussion move is trying to prevail over an opponent, i.e. the proponent is doing his or her best to persuade an opponent of the correctness of his or her argument. The second is that the move is "counter-constructive." Counter-constructiveness is a term which can be used to describe a poor argument that fails to support a claim, and therefore, according to Rudanko: "impede[s] the proper unfolding of a dialogue." It can also be used to describe the proponent's hidden agenda. It is this latter usage, the deceptive one, which is at issue in an *ad socordiam* discussion move. The proponent claims to be simply postponing a

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matter, but secretly he or she does not want the matter to ever come up again. To be able to analyse such a move as a fallacy, we have to make an appeal to the arguer's intention. According to Rudanko this is no problem, because, in linguistic pragmatics discovering a speaker's intention on the basis of knowledge about context, co-text, speaker and hearer, is an every day practise.

My first concern is that it is not very helpful to use a speaker's intention as a method of identifying a discussion move as a fallacy. One of the logical consequences of using a method like this is that the same utterance must be judged fallacious when the intention is bad and sound when the intention is good. In other words: proposing a postponement is deemed to be fallacious when the speaker is actually hoping for a cancellation, but not when the speaker is submitting the proposal sincerely. This makes the identification of fallacies problematic, even if one wants to use linguistic pragmatics to determine an arguer's intention. The method used to search for intention which is sketched out by Rudanko differs from the one which is practised in pragmatics. Pragmatic theories take the formulation of an utterance as their starting point. If the utterances literal meaning is, in the given context, irrelevant, pointless, superfluous or obviously dishonest, then there is reason to believe that the speaker meant something other than, or different to, what he or she explicitly stated. In such a case the speaker is committed to the interpreted other, or different meaning, *by* his or her explicit utterance. It is not evident how Jackson's proposal to postpone the consideration of amendments to a later date, in itself, gives one reason to believe that something else may be meant.

I know that Rudanko thinks differently because, in one of his 2005 publications, he writes that Jackson's discussion move violates the Gricean maxim of Quantity (see references). According to Rudanko (p. 734), Jackson's move is not informative enough, because he only says that he is proposing that a discussion of the amendments be postponed; this gives too little information about his intentions. This seems circular reasoning to me: only after a second intention is attributed to Jackson it is concluded that he violated the maxim because of this second intention. The interpretation of the intention which should have been incited by finding a violation of a maxim, now functions, at the same time, as a reason to conclude that a violation of a maxim has occurred. But Gricean interpretation works the other way around and starts with an utterance's literal meaning. It must first be established that taking a certain utterance literally implies the violating of a maxim, and only then can another meaning be attributed to the utterance. There is also no evidence to support the idea that Jackson's move is a violation of sincerity (the maxim of Quality), as Rudanko does in the same paper. The problem with sincerity is that the lack of it cannot usually be established, unless the speaker is obviously being dishonest—and the maxim is being exploited. In most other cases we have no option other than to hold that a speaker is committed to his or her words and their implications, whether he or she is sincere or not (unless, of course, there is manifest and undeniable evidence which proves that the speaker is demonstrably lying).

The commitments that a speaker has bring me to my second concern. Can Jackson's proposal for a postponement really be qualified as deceptive, and therefore as counter-constructive? Mr. Goodhue and Mr. Madison were not deceived, as is clear from the accusations they made concerning Jackson's altogether negative attitude towards the amendments. However, as far as I can gather from the quotations in the paper, levelling these accusations did not lead to the development of a no/yes argument with Jackson

about his real intentions, because Jackson did not refute the accusations, but simply renewed his argument for his proposal. And this is the only way that the discussion, in my view, could proceed. Jackson was committed to his proposal. If Goodhue and Madison did not like it, their duty was to argue with Jackson about the reasons he had for making the proposal. If Jackson's reasons were poor, Goodhue and Madison would merely have to illustrate this and Jackson's proposal would not gain adherence. However, if Jackson's reasons were good, then Goodhue and Madison would have to outweigh these by producing even better ones, and if they were unable to do so, they should give in. This is how a discussion should develop, and this cannot be altered by one of the discussants promoting an alleged hidden agenda. In other words: a hidden agenda does not have to be counter-constructive, because the discussion can proceed quite well on the basis of the commitments of the participants.

Be that as it may, the idea of counter-constructiveness can be a fruitful one indeed and, on this point, I fully agree with Rudanko. In my view, the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation has developed this concept in a very systematic and practicable way. In this theory, discussion moves are fallacies if they obstruct the critical testing of a standpoint. In concrete terms, this means that fallacies are discussion moves that violate one of the rules which are essential for a critical discussion to take place. In such a discussion resolving a difference of opinion is the goal and the procedure for reaching this goal consists of critically testing the standpoint that the speaker has. According to this definition of a fallacy, Jackson's secret agenda really isn't one at all. None of the rules of discussion forbids one from having an opinion that is different from what one actually says. Discussants are committed to what they actually say, not what they secretly think—this is the pragma-dialectical meta-theoretical principle of externalisation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 52-55). Applying the pragma-dialectical theory, it is rather Goodhue and Madison who are committing a fallacy. But a conclusive judgement cannot be made, because the reader can only rely on the quotations included in the paper. However, the speaker's remarks about Jackson's hidden agenda appear to be used to portray him as a discussant who cannot have good reasons for his proposal anyway, because he is biased. Such a move must be qualified as an *ad hominem* fallacy: trying to make a speaker's contribution to the discussion look worthless by addressing his personality—which includes his motives—instead of his words. A move such as this is truly counter-constructive.

[Link to reply](#)

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